

February 9, 2015

Transportation Committee  
Connecticut General Assembly  
Legislative Office Building, Room 2300  
Hartford, CT 06106

RE: H.B. 6343: An act concerning the restoration of the Housatonic Railroad line

Dear Representative Guerrero, Senator Maynard, Senator Boucher, Representative O'Dea and distinguished members of the Transportation Committee:

On behalf of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, we would like to voice our support for H.B. 6343: An act concerning the restoration of the Housatonic Railroad line. This is an important transportation link serving both northwest Connecticut and Berkshire County, Massachusetts. The Berkshire Metropolitan Planning Commission, whom BRPC serves as staff, has identified improvements to our freight rail infrastructure, as well as the need for much better passenger rail service to this region in its 2007 and 2012 Berkshire Regional Transportation Plans. The 2012 Plan specifically cited support for reintroducing passenger rail service on the former New Haven Berkshire line. Over the past two years, with grant support from the Federal Highway Administration, BRPC was able to work with the six directly affected Berkshire municipalities and citizens from throughout the region to develop a plan for passenger rail stations in the Berkshires if service should be established on this line. With very few exceptions, local and state officials and residents voiced strong support for this project.

On January 6, 2015, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts purchased the underlying real estate and track from the Housatonic Railroad Company, joining Connecticut in now having control of the physical asset. The Commonwealth is committing \$35 million in 2015 to rebuild the tracks in Massachusetts to bring them up to current standards, which will be able to support passenger rail service. The immediate beneficiaries of this major investment are the existing industrial users of the freight service provided by the Housatonic Railroad. It should be noted that the largest users are Connecticut businesses, specifically Becton-Dickinson and Specialty Minerals, both located in Canaan, CT. Due to the freight flow northward to interconnect with CSX's New England Main Line in Pittsfield, the improvement of track in Massachusetts primarily benefits those businesses.

Over the years, the Housatonic Railroad Company has experienced multiple derailments on this line, much of which runs immediately along the Housatonic River. It is our understanding that most of the problems can be traced to the condition of the track itself, which was laid in 1920 so is now fast approaching its centennial in service, much beyond any reasonable design life. The New Haven Railroad and Penn-Central Railroads did not invest in this line at all over the last 30-40 years of their ownership, prior to going into bankruptcy. Thus replacing the physical infrastructure is a public safety and environmental protection issue, as well as being an economic and transportation one. Replacing the track will also reduce the "clickety-clack" of the trains as modern rail reduces noise as it does not have the multiple joints between short sections of track.

Litchfield County and Berkshire County share many characteristics. We are both relatively rural regions which have benefitted from our New York metropolitan area connections and resulting tourism and second home ownership. Unfortunately, we have both also suffered from the loss of high quality manufacturing jobs and the subsequent drain of our younger, more educated populations. In Berkshire County's case (and we would guess that northwest Connecticut is in the same situation), if we do not find bold ways to start to attract younger families and workers in the next decade, we will find ourselves in an escalation of decline as the baby-boomers who make up a very high portion of our population "age-out" over the next 20-30 years. In the Berkshires, we are focusing on multiple strategic initiatives to become significantly more attractive to younger workers and families. One of the key strategies is to reintroduce passenger rail service which provides 21<sup>st</sup> Century connections to the New York metropolitan area. Notable research on what the "Millennial Generation" desires makes it clear that they are much less interested in living in a totally car-dependent environment and desire other means of access, including passenger train service. They want to living in more concentrated walkable centers than their parents and grandparents do. Thus reintroducing passenger rail service in our regions is a very important strategic investment in both our futures.

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission looks forward to continuing to work in partnership with our colleagues at the Northwestern Connecticut Council of Governments, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the State of Connecticut to make significant improvements to the Housatonic Railroad line which is so critical to help retain over 800 existing manufacturing jobs in our regions and to attract a new generation to live and enjoy the special places we call home.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Nathaniel W. Karns", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Nathaniel W. Karns, AICP

Executive Director